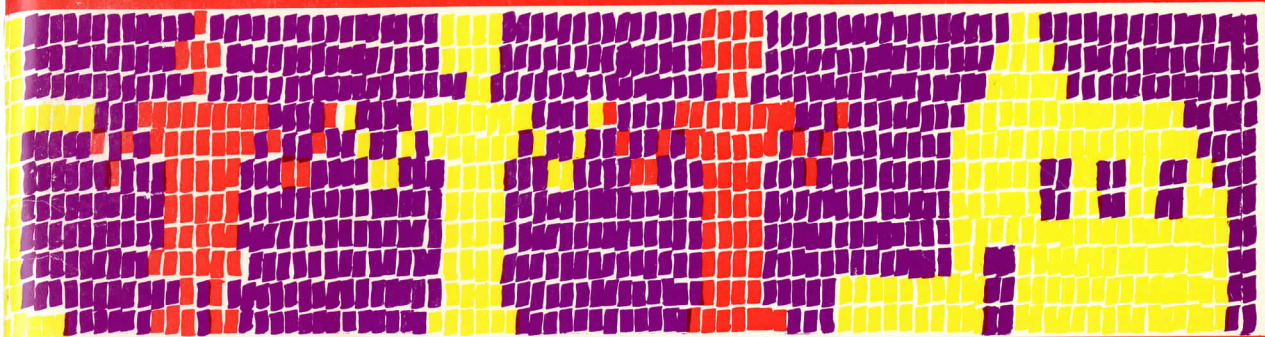
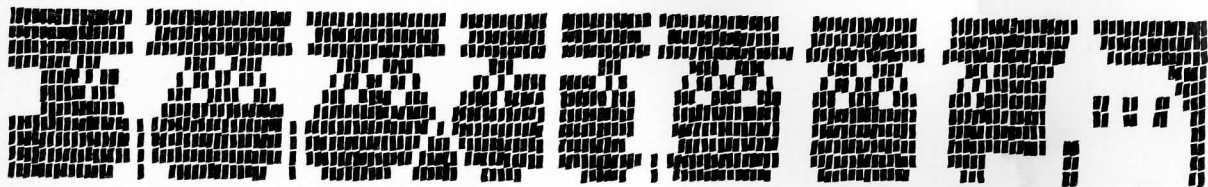




MARIE GUYART MARTIN

IRENE MAHONEY, OSU



"The Huron Belt commemorates the contract made in 1683 between the Jesuit missionaries and the Hurons for the erection of the first wooden church on tribal lands."

BLESSED MARIE GUYART MARTIN

OF THE ORDER OF NUNS

1595-1633

MADE IN THE UNITED STATES

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BOOK CONCERN



BLESSED MARIE GUYART MARTIN

URSULINE OF TOURS
1599 — 1672

(MARIE OF THE INCARNATION)

BY
IRENE MAHONEY, OSU



BLESSED MARIE GUAYARD MARTIN

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

1977 - 1978

DEPARTMENT OF THE INFORMATION



1977 - 1978



When Mother Marie Guyart stepped cautiously from the governor's shallop on to Canadian soil on the morning of August 1, 1639, there were no religious sisters waiting to meet her nor any convent prepared to welcome the weary traveler. She, with her two Ursuline companions and flanked by three Augustinian Hospital Sisters, was the first woman religious to set foot in North America. She had come to Quebec at the invitation of the Jesuit Fathers and the small French colony of Quebec to establish a school for the children of the settlers as well as for the Indian girls.

It had been a long and dangerous voyage. They had been on the ocean for eighty-eight days and during that time they had been buffeted by storms, had barely escaped pursuing pirates, and had come perilously close to being crushed by an iceberg. Along with these flamboyant dangers had been the daily hardship of brackish water, inedible food, and the constant torment of seasickness.

But for Marie those difficult eighty-eight days were only the final portion of a psychological journey that had begun thirty-three years before when, at the age of seven, she had her first experience of God's personal love.

There was nothing unusual about the little girl to whom the Lord appeared. Everything about her was "average." Tours, the city of her birth, was an ordinary city. It had had its taste of war, of plague, of religious dissension; but so had most French cities of the sixteenth century. It was a pretty city, situated on the

banks of the smooth-flowing Loire, and distinguished for the prosperous quality of its life. Marie's family was a normal, bourgeois household. Her father was a baker; her mother was a capable French housewife, a pious woman who loved her children, helped her husband, enjoyed her neighbors. The Guyarts were neither rich nor poor; they were "comfortable."

It was to the middle child (the Guyarts had eight children in all, of whom Marie was the fourth) of this comfortable, undistinguished bourgeois family that the Lord appeared, asking the question which would change the direction of Marie's life forever.

When she later described this event, Marie speaks of it as a "dream." It seems pointless to argue about the terminology: a dream, a vision, a semi-dream, a mystic experience. Whatever the term, the result was the same: this was Marie's entrance into the way of divine love. She herself later explains that she found herself in a schoolyard (a psychologically valid place for a child to be) and looking up saw the "Lord Jesus Christ moving through the air" to her. It says much about the quality of the experience and the quality of the child that there was not a moment of fear or hesitation. Her response was totally a response of trust and love. She opened her arms to the Lord without constraint and felt in return His arms about her. It was a simple matter of gentleness and love. When He put His question to her: "Will you be mine?" her answer was an unquestioning, "Yes."

With that, the “dream” faded and Marie continued her untroubled, childlike sleep. There were no further visions or dreams, no other unusual manifestations of God’s love. She lived out the remainder of her childhood in perfect normalcy. She was a “good child” who obeyed her parents, helped her mother, loved giving alms to the poor, enjoyed taking part in church services. She was bright and happy, quick in manner, with no outward manifestation of unusual spiritual gifts. Consequently, when at the age of fourteen or fifteen she mentioned to her parents that she might like to enter a convent, her mother did not take her seriously. Writing later in life, Marie conjectured that her mother found her a bit “too lively” to fit the conventional image of a nun. In her parents’ eyes Marie would, like her older sister, make a fine competent wife and mother; and so in 1617 when she was just seventeen, they arranged a “good marriage” for their fourth child with Claude Martin, a young silk merchant of Tours.

With her marriage we come to one of the first points of contradiction in Marie’s life. She tells us later that from her first childhood dream the desire to belong wholly to God never left her. And yet she made no demur when a marriage was arranged for her, describes her husband as someone having “every fine quality of soul and body,” and seems truly to have loved both her husband and the child she bore within the first two years of her marriage. If there were difficulties in her marriage – and Marie alludes to these darkly – they seem to have stemmed not from her relation with her husband but from that

with her mother-in-law and from people associated with her husband's business.

At the age of nineteen Marie had no reason to believe that her life would be any different from the lives of the other bourgeois women of Tours: she would have more children; her husband might grow more prosperous as he grew older and more experienced; even her mother-in-law would probably come to live at peace with them. Whatever her adolescent dreams of the cloister, Marie seems to have been far from a repining wife. Belonging to God never meant for her separating herself from everything else. Her contemplative gifts in no way dampened her natural alacrity. Service, as well as prayer, was part of her donation to God. Learning to manage a household, to bring up her child, to adjust to the needs and expectations of her husband – all this was part of the rhythm of her life.

Then suddenly, only weeks before her twentieth birthday, the pattern was destroyed. Claude Martin, whose health had been a worry for some months, was dead. Even in a society which was used to sudden and early death, Marie's state evoked more than ordinary compassion. At nineteen she was a widow and a widow with singularly grim assets: a mother-in-law whose fear of being left unprovided made her shrewish and importunate; a six-month's-old son; a business slipping into bankruptcy.

In the months that followed, the young widow Martin proved herself to be of unusual mettle. She refused to avail herself of the French law which would free

her from the responsibility of her husband's debts and insisted on taking charge of his affairs. So successful was she that she was soon able to pay off all the creditors before selling the business.

In this, her kinspeople and neighbors found her admirable – if unusual. Her next decision, however, was less popular. She announced, against prevailing custom and advice, that she had no intention of remarrying. Her relatives urged; Marie was immovable. They pointed out her duty to her child; she assured them that she would take care of him. What did she intend to do, they asked. She would return to her father's house; she would live there quietly, in service to her father and to the poor, and in prayer.

Before her obduracy, their arguments died away. It was the first of Marie's "follies" – the first of those inexplicable acts which seemed at such cross-purposes with the natural order of things. To those who watched, the gesture seemed so extravagant, so unnecessary, so beyond the norm. As so often in her life, she made no effort to explain, as though she accepted the fact that what she did was beyond explanation. "It is what God wants," she said and left that as her only explanation.

During the years of her marriage God had opened up the way of prayer to her and had made her spirit "sing" in His presence. Now she settled herself in the attic rooms of her father's house (her mother had died some time earlier), certain that solitude was the path He desired of her. Yet scarcely a year later,

Marie left the solitude she had so passionately defended for a way of life that seemed inimical to everything she had so recently chosen. Her older sister, Madame Buisson, needed someone to help with her large household and Marie had agreed to take on the task.

Hindsight enables us to read these strange and contradictory choices as part of God's purifying will for her. But neither Marie's contemporaries nor Marie herself had the advantage of hindsight. Stability, constancy, steadfastness are easily translated into "virtue"; while change, particularly rapid or unexplained change, is translated with equal ease into "caprice." "Make up your mind, Madame Martin!" might have been a popular response to Marie's sudden shifts in lifestyles.

What she herself thought about the successive changes in her life is difficult to know, for in the spiritual autobiographies she has left, she refers only briefly to these events. It is hard to believe, however, that she did not suffer from anxiety in her effort to discern God's will for her. Was she never to be allowed to settle down? Were God's paths for her always to be so crisscrossed with sudden turnings and reversals? Or was she, perhaps, listening to her own inconstant voice and mistaking it for the voice of God?

Yet whatever sudden changes there were in her exterior life, there was a straight movement forward in her hidden life of prayer. These years spent in her sister's busy household and later in taking charge of her brother-in-law's

extensive carting business were among the most grace-filled of her life. It was during these years that God led her and shaped her for her unique vocation: the vocation of a mystic living a life of active service. She lived in God's presence, not in a mere intellectual acknowledgement of His being but in the sustaining experience of loving union.

Extraordinary graces followed each other in quick succession. In a vision, which she was later to describe as the moment of her "conversion," she experienced the depths of her own sinfulness and inadequacy and her need for a Savior. Shortly after, she was initiated more deeply into an understanding of the Passion of the Lord – an understanding which led her into a new path of humility and austerity. Drawn by love and under the guidance of her spiritual director, she made a vow of chastity and a short while later a vow of obedience to her director. In whatever terms God revealed Himself to her, the thrust of the revelation was clear: God was Love – love personal, intimate, compassionate, gentle. She was blissful in this love and later wrote: "Had anyone asked me: What do you desire? I would have answered, 'Nothing, for God is my all.'"

It was an extraordinary life, for at the same time that God led her inward with an unbroken sense of His loving presence, He led her outward to a life of unusual responsibility. Her brother-in-law, Paul Buisson, having discovered her remarkable ability as a business woman, had placed her in charge of a considerable portion of his business. Her days were often spent on the wharves of Tours, supervising workmen, keeping track of shipments, checking

the condition of the horses and the wagons and flatboats which Buisson used for his carting business.

Far from finding the two dimensions of action and contemplation incompatible, for Marie one sustained and strengthened the other. It was God, His abiding presence and the realization of His love, that moved her toward service of her neighbor. Such acts, she wrote, "assuaged" her need to make some small return to God who did so much for her. Her life of prayer was her secret and constantly-flowing spring which gave life to her actions. Perhaps this was to be her life – a life in which she had little of her own, a life lived in someone else's house, tending someone else's business, while her unrelenting course of austerity, humility, prayer ran steadily beneath the surface.

She would have been content with such a life, it seems. She was glad to be a servant, happy to share in the spiritual poverty and humility of Jesus Christ. But once again she was confronted with another of those mysterious crossroads, those points of contradiction which must have frightened and bewildered her: her childhood desire to be a religious returned with uncompromising force. Being a woman of practical commonsense, she did her best to brush aside such a dream in favor of her present reality. She was useful where she was, she argued with herself. Her sister needed her. She had her inner cloister, her prayer, her life of abiding happiness with God. She was close to thirty – a considerable age in a century when no one expected to live much beyond

forty. What convent would want a poor dowerless widow? And the most telling argument of them all: she had a son, a child not yet eleven.

Yet all her logic could not silence the impelling call of God. For several years she wrestled, often in darkness, with the unaccountable exactions of the Lord. She veered from desire to desire, at one moment feeling that the cloister was her natural home, the place where she would finally be at rest; the next, standing in astonishment at the impossibility of her own desires. She took counsel with her spiritual director and with other people of "wisdom and piety," who while acknowledging the extraordinary quality of the call ended by conceding that they felt that the call came truly from God.

Finally, toward the end of 1630 her final doubts were vanquished and Marie made preparations to leave her sister's home and enter the convent, remitting the care of her child into the hands of her sister. On January 25, 1631 she kissed her son and her father goodbye, left the Buisson household for the last time, and entered the Ursuline Convent on the rue de Poitou.

Even her choice of convent had seemed strangely contradictory to those who observed her preparations. Those who knew Marie Guyart – her confessor, various spiritual persons of whom she had sought advice – acknowledged that her spiritual life was one of extraordinary calibre. She had while still in her twenties received graces that placed her in that small group of souls distinguished as "mystics." Would she not, then, choose as her spiritual home a religious order devoted to contemplation – the Carmelites, the Feuillantines?



But Marie's attraction was to none of the traditionally contemplative monasteries. She chose instead the Ursulines, a congregation, recently founded in Italy by Angela Merici, specifically for the "education of girls." Once again, Marie gave little explanation for her choice beyond indicating that she felt "an attraction for the education of souls" and that when she passed the Ursuline convent her heart "gave a penetrating leap" which led her to believe that God wanted her there.

For the next eight years Marie lived as a cloistered religious of the Order of St. Ursula. She finished her novitiate, made her vows, acted as headmistress of the boarding school, assisted the mistress of novices. She went through periods of enormous grace when she felt that "nothing could ever be difficult again." And she went through equally strong periods of darkness, darkness when God's loving presence was only a dim and questionable memory, when convent life seemed a bore and a delusion, when she remembered the joys of married life so intensely that she was humiliated by her own desires. Her spiritual director had been sent to another city and in his place she was given a priest who showed nothing but suspicion and disdain when she tried to explain her spiritual life to him. Her superior who before her entrance had been a sustaining influence now became a further cross.

Most painful of all her crosses was her son. Instead of becoming reconciled to his mother's departure, he became month by month more difficult and irresponsible. Finally she received a letter from the headmaster of the Jesuit school where he was enrolled saying that his conduct made it impossible for him to be kept there any longer.

It was the final cross and Marie, stricken by guilt and a sense of failure, begged God to relieve her of the obligation to be a religious. She wanted only to return to the world – the world she had left so gladly but which now seemed to her a paradise compared to the dry, narrow existence in which she had been plunged. “This child will become a good-for-nothing,” she complained to God, seeing her son’s ruin as her personal responsibility. But God who had been so gentle with her in the past was now implacable. He wanted her to remain a religious. He would take care of her son, in His own way, in His own time, He assured her. The promise left her comfortless with nothing to lean on but her own unsteady confidence built on the shaky remembrance of God’s love.

During her third year in the convent, in the midst of her uneasiness about her son and her own vocation, she was visited once again by a vivid and significant dream. As in the dream of her childhood, the dream presented itself with dramatic immediacy. In her dream she was with a secular, an unknown woman, and together they were leaving their homes. It was Marie who was the leader, although she seemed to have no idea of their destination. With “great strides” they overcame the obstacles before them and soon arrived at a “beautiful place” guarded by a man in a white garment.

The land they now entered was unusually lovely. “The sky was its only roof,” Marie wrote later. As they continued, they could see in the distance a little

church made of white marble on top of which sat the Blessed Virgin. She held the Holy Child in her arms while at her feet were spread the valleys and mountains of a "vast and lonely country" shrouded in dense fog. The Blessed Virgin was gazing with pity at the land stretching before them. Then, she turned and said something to the Child. The words were inaudible but Marie was certain that whatever the Virgin had said had something to do with her.

The dream was inexplicable to her. She did not recognize the country with its vast stretches of forest and mountains. It was like no land she had ever seen. The only country she knew was the gentle, domesticated country of the Loire Valley. What her dream had revealed to her was far beyond the reaches of her imagination. What this land could have to do with her or what the secret words of the Mother to the Child indicated she could not fathom. Only one thing was clear to her: the dream was from God and it was in some way to shape her spiritual destiny.

Little by little during the next few years the significance of the dream was revealed to her: by further dreams, through the advice of her spiritual director, and through coincidental contacts with Jesuit missionaries. The land she had seen was Canada and God's command was that she go there "to build a house for Jesus and Mary."

The command was bizarre and in apparent contradiction to the very vocation as an Ursuline to which God had led her so inexorably. The Ursulines

– as almost all women religious of the time–were a cloistered congregation, living quiet lives of prayer and teaching behind their cloistered walls. In the normal course of things they lived and died within the boundaries of the convent they had originally entered. Even to visit another Ursuline monastery was extraordinary. To leave France, to cross the ocean, to establish a house in the crude and perilous forest of New France – this was unthinkable.

And there were those who did not hesitate to tell Marie so. Strange enough that she should have been called to the cloister at such an unusual time and in such an unusual way. And now – to suggest that God wished her to undo the life she had so painfully put together: “Pride and illusion,” said one Jesuit priest whom she consulted. Even Marie herself was bewildered, wondering if perhaps those who thought her deluded by “idle fancies” might not be right. She hesitated, making no further effort to interpret or realize her mysterious dream until God, displeased with her lack of trust, threatened to abandon her if she did not obey Him.

The story of those two years when, finally, things began to fall into place, when her superiors acknowledged the validity of her call, when the Jesuits who had already established a series of Canadian missions encouraged and helped her with the practical details of her mission – this is a complex and sometimes amusing tale. Fortunately, Marie herself recorded all the details in the long spiritual autobiography she later wrote at the request of her son.

Finally on February 22, 1639 – over five years since the time of her original dream – Marie accompanied by another Ursuline nun of Tours and their secular benefactor, Madame de la Peltrie, left Tours for Paris where the final preparations for their voyage would be made. By the time of their final departure on May 4, they had been joined by a third Ursuline from the Dieppe convent and a young girl – maid to Madame de la Peltrie – who in time would become the first novice to enter in Canada. In addition were three Augustinian sisters who were to found a hospital for the Indians as well as a number of Jesuit missionaries.

When after days of waiting, the wind changed in their favor and the three ships were able to sail out of the roadstead, Marie realized that a portion of her life was ended. In the last few months she had had adventures beyond her imagining: for the first time she had traveled out of Tours; she had seen Paris, visited the court, twice been received by the reigning queen and seen the six-month-old infant who would become the glorious Sun-King, Louis XIV. She had met people of influence, both religious and lay, with whom she would correspond for the rest of her life and would be of immense importance to the Canadian mission. All her old business acumen – put aside when she had entered the Ursulines – had come surging back and she found herself surprisingly at home in discussing the practical details of provisioning the ship and organizing the materials necessary for their work in the New World.

But beneath all the day-to-day business of their voyage pulsed another kind of excitement: she was, in very fact, giving her life to God according to His own

request. The thought filled her with elation. She was relinquishing everything known and secure: her land, her language, her family, her religious sisters. There was nothing left to rely on but God alone. And yet at the very moment that her heart leaped with joy at the thought, another emotion stole through her. Fear. What would happen to her in New France? Would she be able to sustain so high a vocation? Would she at almost forty years of age be able to adjust to such a different way of life?

She was not ignorant of the hazards. She had read the accounts the Jesuits had sent back to France. She had talked with those who had experienced the hardships of intense cold, of small, cramped living conditions, of inadequate food. She knew that the Indians were not always welcoming hosts, that their way of life would probably disgust and repel her. She knew that missionaries had died in Canada amid terrible torments. Most of all she was aware of her own weakness. "The smallest things make me suffer," she wrote. "I am afraid of everything; I will be worth nothing in Canada."

Yet for her, her very fear was but another reason to entrust herself entirely to God and she wrote to her director: "I firmly believe that my Divine Jesus will give me all the help necessary for this exalted enterprise, for He is Love, and much too kind not to help those who hope in Him. It is in this that my peace consists, and in my resolution to be faithful to Him."



It was in this spirit that in the first week of May she had said farewell to the France that she was never to see again.

The arrival of the ships from France was always an event for the Quebec colonists, but in 1639 there was an exceptional jubilation. With the coming of the Hospital Sisters and the Ursulines the colony would soon be able to boast of both a school and a hospital.

The new arrivals were given little time to recover from the fatigue of their voyage. The following day they were taken to the Jesuit Mission at Sillery where they were able to see close at hand the Indian children who would soon be their charges. Before the week was out, the Ursulines were established in their tiny house only a few yards from the river. In this small, draughty dwelling, consisting of only two rooms and always damp from its proximity to the St. Lawrence, the Ursulines were to spend the next three years. Their house became both their cloister and their boarding school. And when during that first autumn the dreaded small pox broke out in the colony, it became as well a hospital for their mortally sick Indian pupils.

By the time winter frost had set in, the nuns had already used most of their provisions, including some of their own supply of clothing in ministering to the poor Indians who flocked to them. That winter they experienced their first taste of Canadian cold – a cold so intense that Marie explained that she could not write letters during the winter because the ink froze in its bottle. Sometimes, the nuns admitted later, they thought they would die of cold.

Years later Marie confided in a letter: "At the beginning we suffered so much – especially because of our poor housing – that it is extraordinary that we aren't all dead or at least permanent invalids."

They survived, however, and when on the following July 2 the ships from France arrived, bringing two more Ursuline volunteers, they felt like veteran missionaries. Their school was crowded with wiggling little Indian girls, totally unaccustomed to the discipline which the nuns attempted to impose. "They are as naked as worms when they come to us," Marie wrote, "and we have to scrub them from head to foot because of the grease their parents use to oil their bodies." Yet with all their erratic behavior they were lovable children with a great gift for mimicry. The nuns could not but be amused as their charges followed them to their make-shift chapel, aping their gestures and their singing. The misfortune was that few of their pupils remained with them long enough to get even a rudimentary education. Unused to the confined life of the sisters, they longed for the freedom of the forest and often slipped away as soon as the lure of spring weather became too strong.

Three years after their arrival the Ursulines were at last able to move to a proper house. Their new building was situated in the Upper City, away from the encroaching tides of the St. Lawrence. As superior, Marie was largely responsible for its construction and at its completion she wrote proudly: "Our house is built entirely of stone; it is ninety-two feet long and twenty-eight feet wide. It is the largest and most beautiful house of its kind in Canada." Yet she

also had to acknowledge that when they moved in on November 21, 1642 the house was far from finished and the cold they endured that winter was almost fatal. The priests who came to offer Mass were in danger of having their hands and ears frozen and the Ursulines to protect themselves from the cold constructed "wooden chests lined with serge or other cloth" where they slept during the night.

That year perils closed in on them from all sides. Their benefactor, Madame de la Peltrie, had temporarily abandoned them and the monies they had counted on were given by her to other causes. France dallied in its promise to send French soldiers to protect the colonists and the Iroquois, emboldened by Quebec's obvious weakness, invaded closer and closer to the city.

That fall a large number of the nuns' friends fell prey to the Iroquois. A group of friendly Hurons was captured, two Jesuit associates were killed, and Father Isaac Jogues had been taken prisoner and horribly mutilated. Among the captives was a little Huron girl, a pupil of the Ursulines and one of their first converts. The news was chilling and the nuns suffered not only for their friends but for their own safety as well.

About this time Marie writing to a friend in France about the conditions in Quebec concluded: "In the light of these words, would you not say . . . that all is lost? One would be forced to believe it were it not for that loving providence which takes care of even the smallest earthworm . . . As for me, my heart is in

peace, thanks to the mercy of our good Jesus for whom we are working. My confidence in His love had made me decide to keep our boarders and to go on helping our poor savages until the end."

The mood of this early letter sets the tone for most of Marie's thirty-three years in Canada. Although their financial state improved as their school expanded, yet never were they free of the worries besetting a missionary foundation. With an enlarged school came the need for an increase in personnel. The perils and hardships of their life made it essential that those who came to join them be spiritually mature, capable of adjustment, and of unalloyed faith in God. Surrounded as they were by so many difficulties and living so closely together, they could not sustain a dissatisfied or capricious religious.

But if one reads between the lines it becomes clear that there were periods of hostility and mistrust among the sisters. Marie herself seems to have been the subject of such hostility and while she never provides a detailed account of the trouble, she acknowledges that some among the community wrote back to France complaining of her wilful, domineering spirit. She was both crushed and angered by the accusation, unable to understand the pusillanimous spirit that would stir up dissension in such a "holy enterprise."

While the community suffered from internal strife, the Iroquois invasions became increasingly threatening. Even the Jesuits suffered a loss of confidence

and discussed abandoning the Canadian mission for awhile – and, indeed, some of the Fathers did return to France. They could not be blamed, for in a single year they had lost some of their most experienced and successful men: Isaac Jogues was dead. So were Jean de Brebeuf and his companion Gabriel Lalemant. Noel Chabanel, Antoine Daniel, Charles Garnier had all been tortured and killed. Others, less fortunate perhaps, had been taken captive and dragged into the wilderness to be the slaves and victims of their captors.

Shortly after the departure of the Jesuits, the Ursulines were subject to another loss. One snowy night shortly after Christmas, their monastery, “that beautiful house” of which they had been so proud, burned to the ground. They had time to salvage nothing – neither clothes nor food – as the fire, accelerated by the winter wind, spread through the dormitory where the little boarders slept. When finally they gathered together in the snow, at a distance from the blazing building, they gave thanks that no one had been lost – and tried not to imagine what it would be like to begin all over again. It is a credit to their industry and ingenuity that in less than two years the convent had been rebuilt and the nuns were once again able to continue their work.

During these difficult years with their endless worries about money, about personnel, about their own safety, one joy suffused everything for Marie: her son – so long rebellious, moody, resentful – had found his spiritual home.

About two years after Marie had sailed from Dieppe, Claude had entered the Benedictine Order at St. Maur. Marie's pride and joy and gratitude were unbounded. She remembered those anxious months when she had complained to God, "If he becomes a good-for-nothing, I will have only myself to blame." She remembered, too, God's promise to care for her son in His own time. He had more than fulfilled that promise. Whatever she had hoped for Claude, she had not dared to hope so high. The letter she wrote to him upon hearing the news of his vocation is addressed with a flourish of elation: "To my very dear Brother in Our Lord, Brother Claude Martin, Novice of the Reformed Benedictines at Vendome."

For the next six years she followed his formation anxiously until in 1648 she received the culminating joy that Claude was at last a priest. The years of constraint were dissipated and they were now able to share each other's spiritual longings. Marie became – far beyond her aspirations – the mother of her son. He set out his perplexities and concerns before her and she counselled and guided with a firmness and perception born of her experience.

She, in turn, answered his questions about her own spiritual life with remarkable candor. Again and again he asked for long, detailed descriptions of her life of prayer, of the conditions under which she had entered the Ursulines, of the extraordinary graces God had given her. She set her native reticence aside and sometimes writing long into the night, she responded to his demands. Her only request was that these revealing papers be for his eyes alone and that should anything happen to him that he would make sure that

they were destroyed. Claude apparently conceded without giving any hint that he was carefully saving every scrap Marie wrote to him so that someday he might put together a life of his extraordinary mother. We cannot help but be grateful for the subterfuge, for without it we would know far less of Marie than we do.

It was to Claude that she confided not only the unusual graces and trials of her early life, but the tenor of her later life as well. The years in Canada, while tumultuous in terms of activity, had had for Marie a kind of inner calm. Although there had been periods of desolation and moments of high grace, there had been nothing like the exaltations and depressions of her earlier years. It was as though God had used those first years to temper her soul in the fire of both love and adversity. Once the work was completed, he could send her forth for the work he had planned for her.

Toward the end of her life she looked back in amazement at all that had happened in her early years: marriage, motherhood, widowhood, solitude, the career of both servant and business woman, religious vocation, the dream of Canada. And through it all, those penetrating and exacting graces in which God had immersed her until there were moments when she wondered if she would have the bodily strength necessary to sustain his action in her.



And then Canada. Canada, where the days were filled with endless preoccupation about the care of others until there was hardly a moment to think about herself. Canada—cold, forbidding, frightening, the vast and lonely land of her dream. There was nothing in Canada that resembled the religion of her youth. The beautiful Gothic churches of Tours with their tall towers and open naves; the spacious, ordered convent of the Ursulines with its disciplined horarium; the Catholic population that provided unconsciously an atmosphere of faith — she had left it all behind.

Although there were times when the small, inconvenient Quebec convent, surrounded by the encroaching wilderness, the difficulties of living always so close to each other and to their boarders, the uneven liturgical ceremonies often disrupted by the misplaced piety of the Indians seemed intolerable — yet never would she have exchanged the years in Canada for a more comfortable and secure existence. In Canada Marie found herself — or perhaps more accurately she was brought to full flowering. In Canada she was at once Martha and Mary — the waters of contemplation and action mingling until they formed a single stream. She herself, in awe of the wonders God had accomplished in her, wrote to Claude: "I am like one of those birds who finds its nourishment while flying."

As her life drew to a close, it was more and more difficult to describe her inner spirit. Her prayer had become very simple — too simple for analysis or definition. In one of her last letters to her son she wrote in response to his

questions: "It would be very difficult for me to enlarge upon this in order to give you an account of my prayer and my inner disposition, for what God gives me is so simple and detached from all sense experience that in two or three words I have said everything. Hitherto I could do nothing in my prayer except to say from the very core of my being: 'My God, my great God, my Life, my Love, my Glory.' Today I say very much the same thing . . . but even more, my soul uttering these simple and intimate words feels the fullness of their meaning."

Her life had come full circle. The invocations which had come spontaneously to her at the beginning of her spiritual life still formed the heart of her prayer; but now their meaning – which at the beginning she had only dimly sensed – was full and radiant.

God had once said to her shortly before her entrance into the Ursulines, "Hurry, there is nothing left for you to do in the world." Now in the spring of her seventy-second year He said it again. On April 30, 1672 Marie Guyart Martin, known in religion as Marie of the Incarnation, after thirty-three years of unrelenting labor for the church in Canada, died in the convent she had founded. Like St. Paul she could say, "I have fought a good fight; I have kept the faith."

On July 19, 1911 the Church publicly recognized the heroic quality of her virtue and declared her "Venerable." On June 22, 1980 Pope John Paul II proclaimed her "Blessed."

For a more detailed life of Marie Guyart, see:

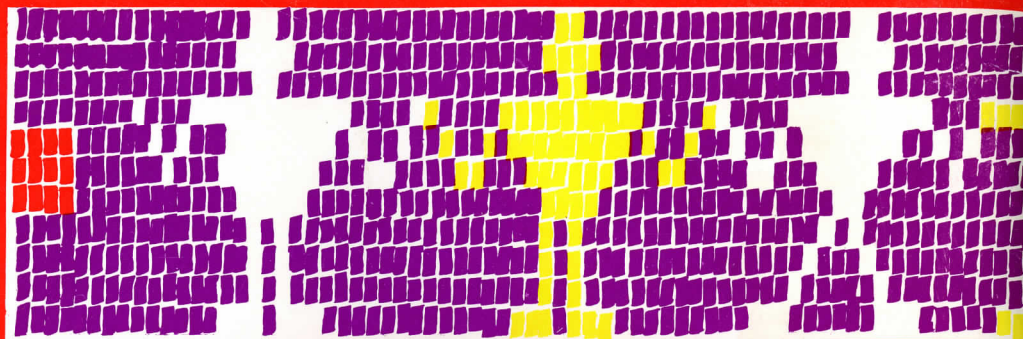
Marie of the Incarnation, Mystic and Missionary by
Mother Denis Mahoney, OSU. Doubleday, 1964.

This volume, currently out of print, can be obtained
at the Ursuline Provincialate
323 East 198 St.
Bronx, New York 10458

Marie of the Incarnation by Dom Guy Oury, OSB
Translated by Sister Miriam Thompson, OSU.
This volume can be obtained through the
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